

## **I am the NIH . . . and I Need Your Help**

“ . . . NIH is the steward of medical and behavioral research for the nation. Its mission is science in pursuit of fundamental knowledge about the nature and behavior of living systems and the applicability of that knowledge to extend healthy life and reduce the burdens of illness and disability . . .”  
([www.nih.gov/about/almanac/index.html](http://www.nih.gov/about/almanac/index.html)).

This is my mission statement, and I have never been so worried about my ability to accomplish it. My lofty aim of working to extend life and reduce the burden of disease is being threatened by the intrusion of politics into the very heart of my mission.

First, allow me to introduce myself. I am the National Institutes of Health, known internationally as the NIH. Begun as a one-room Laboratory of Hygiene in 1887, I am the proud home of 27 Institutes and Centers, employing more than 18,000 scientists, administrators, and support staff. I have had a wealth of celebrations and milestones. There have been many occasions on which all of those associated with me have felt justifiably proud. I have funded such scientists as Dr. Harold Varmus and Drs. James Watson and Francis Crick. I have had the honor of watching Dr. Marshall Nirenberg (National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute), Dr. Martin Rodbell (National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences), Nobel Laureates all, work within my walls. I have had the added thrill of watching Dr. Frances Collins and his colleagues decipher the human genetic code.

I could not have done it without you.

It has taken the work of so many to keep me thriving as the world's greatest center of health-related science. I must thank so many politicians, republicans and democrats alike, who have supported me on the floors of Congress. Many have played a major role in my growth — from Richard Nixon's signing of the National Cancer Act of 1971 to William Clinton's support of the doubling of my budget in recent years. I need also thank my lifeblood — the basic and applied scientists in medical and academic centers whom I am fortunate enough to support as they struggle to conquer all of the diseases that affect the human condition. There are NIH scientists, administrators, and support staff too numerous to mention that have been absolutely essential in partnering with scientists around the world to cure disease and enhance quality of life. Finally, there are the patients who have generously contributed to our knowledge base by participating in clinical trials and other research needed to learn more about disease, treatment, and cure. Over the years, at times the partnerships among politicians, scientists, patients, and NIH staff have been challenged. My friends have not always been on the same page, with disputes often focused on the need for more attention and funding for this disease or that, or even heated discussions about patients' rights and ethical issues. However, we have all worked out these squabbles, driven by the same shared passion to advance the medical and behavioral sciences.

Through all of these milestones and squabbles, we have survived and thrived. Now, as I write this, I feel an unprecedented threat to all I hold dear. There are those who seem not to

share our mission — seem not to share our passionate focus on advancing the science of health care — seem not to share our feeling of working together to accomplish greatness. Most critically, perhaps, they seem not to share an appreciation for the integrity of science, and for the need to simply not allow political and religious ideologies to walk through the doors of the NIH and take up residence.

The most recent example of this behavior that threatens the very foundation of science occurred on July 11, 2003, on the House of Representatives floor. Reps. Pat Toomey (R-PA) and Ralph Regula (R-OH) felt the need to isolate and “de-fund” five grants, deeming that this research was not worthy of taxpayer money, completely ignoring the careful two-tiered peer review system that has served me so well over the years. This amendment (on the Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations House Bill 2660) reflected a level of interference in the peer review process that I view as intolerable. Moreover, the majority of these grants dealt with AIDS, gay/lesbian issues, or ethnic groups out of the majority. I am the NATIONAL Institutes of Health, and my mission and vision embrace all regardless of race, religion, or sexual preference. My mission statement to “extend human life and reduce the burden of illness” contains no exclusionary statements. Doing otherwise is inhumane. My heart skipped a beat when I heard the vote was 212–210. The amendment failed, but only barely. Let me heartily give thanks to the many Democrats and Republicans alike who stood up for the dignity and integrity of science on that day. I also thank all of the members of the scientific community who volunteered their opinion to Congress on this attempt to destroy my historically carefully-crafted scientific funding process.

A leading candidate for one of my key expert scientific panels, the National Advisory Council on Drug Abuse, received a phone call from a Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) official regarding his nomination. This candidate, when questioned, indicated that he did not agree with administration policies on the issues of abortion and needle exchange. He also answered the question asked of him regarding his most recent presidential vote in the wrong direction. Thus, this candidate, supported by the National Institute of Drug Abuse and author of more than 300 scientific articles, was denied a slot.

There are other glaring examples of the undue influence of politics on the scientific processes of NIH. After a number of conservative Congressmen and Congresswomen noted concern about the position of a National Cancer Institute web site on abortion and breast cancer risk, the web site information noting no such connection was deleted. It was not until a full scientific conference was convened that the information, again showing no link, was reinstated on the web site.

Similar stories have been told by the Centers for Disease Control, related to one of their leading institutes, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). University of North Carolina Professor Dana Loomis has disclosed a level of review and political micro-managing that is most distressing (*Science*, 298 (5597): 1335–1336, 2002). The level of scrutiny described found the DHHS rejecting candidates nominated for service on a NIOSH study section, despite these candidates already serving as temporary members for some time, and following approval at every other level. No reason was provided for the failure to confirm, but

one candidate publicly supported a workplace ergonomics standard, a view not shared by the current political administration.

Internally, the morale of my staff has never seemed lower. Many of my dedicated workers are haunted by the specter of “A-76,” an initiative supposedly designed to save money. It is a process that is designed to “outsource” government work to the private sector, including scientific positions. This will not save money. This will decrease, not increase, work efficiency. This will directly impact all of those who interact with me. Initially, this would have affected up to 50% of my staff. While recent indications are that such outsourcing plans have been trimmed in scope, literally tens of thousands of hours of NIH staff time and millions of dollars have been consumed both preparing for and aggressively combating this proposed disaster, not to mention the distress it has caused my faithful workers. I have even seen NIH workers picketing to protest this major change in the operations of NIH, a process that may clearly impact how we manage science. I am still not certain what this plan will hold for thousands of NIH staff. Be assured that this is not a process that can be easily rolled back with a new political administration. It is not a process we can simply “wait out.” A-76 will change the basic operational structure of the NIH, and will be with us for a long time to come.

In addition, two of the new DHHS-wide management objectives for senior administrative and scientific staff include “Complete the FY 2003 Competitive Sourcing Program” and “Consolidate Management Functions,” both with ominous overtones threatening my administrative and support staff. The “consolidating” mission will be global in its impact, including information technology, budget, procurement, financial management, grants management, and other workers throughout DHHS, including NIH.

Peer-reviewed scientific manuscripts of NIH scientists are being reviewed at levels extending to bureaucrats at the DHHS in order to avoid the production of written products that might be viewed as embarrassing to the administration. This severely hampers the timeliness of manuscripts and monographs even if no “sensitive” material is included.

My experience indicates that when workers are treated like second-class citizens, they soon begin to feel like second-class citizens. This is unfair. We have already lost many valued leaders. We will lose more if it does not stop.

In the best of all worlds, politicians and scientists work together to enhance the health of the nation. Politicians allocate needed funds to advance research to cure disease and maintain quality of life. Scientists respond with gratitude in their basic and clinical laboratories to decrease morbidity and mortality from a host of illnesses. They historically have made a powerful team. We appreciate that there is no perfect firewall between politics and science. However, just as doctors should decide what medical treatment is needed for their patients rather than insurance companies, so, too, should scientists decide on the quality of science, not politicians. Unfortunately what we are experiencing is far too distant from the best of all worlds.

I need your help — the help of the scientific, medical, and lay communities. I need your help in allowing me to continue to exemplify and promote the highest level of scientific integrity,

public accountability and social responsibility in the conduct of science. I need the help of those many politicians who care about the NIH mission and our devotion to advancing the health of the American public. It is time to make those who are abusing power and political influence feel as uncomfortable as we feel when they trample on our mission and vision. I urge you not to remain neutral on this frontal attack on myself, my dedicated staff, and science itself.

I cannot fulfill my mission when leading scientists must pass a series of political litmus tests in order to work with me. I cannot fulfill my mission when politicians target grants for topics they deem unworthy of funding, despite scientific peer acclaim. I cannot fulfill my mission when my workers must constantly look over their shoulder to see if they are on a list for “outsourcing” or a victim of “consolidation.” I cannot fulfill my mission when web sites providing health information are consciously and deliberately altered to fit ethical and/or religious beliefs. The NIH should be about the open celebration of the scientific enterprise, not a target for political agendas to be played out on a national stage. The stakes are far too high.

I encourage all of my friends to contact the NIH Director, Dr. Elias Zerhouni, to express concern for science and for the staff of the NIH. I plead with you to contact your Congressman or Congresswoman to express your fears about what happened on the House floor on July 11<sup>th</sup>. This is likely not the last time that targeting individual grants in this fashion will be attempted. Those in support of such actions must be buoyed by the narrow margin of defeat. I ask that you inform the DHHS and those in the Senate and House of the daily impact that misguided administrative and personnel policies such as A-76 have on the hearts and minds of my workers.

Why am I asking for your help now? This is now the 2004 election season. It is time to become even more involved in the political process, and much more vigilant about the influence of politics on our science. On an individual and professional organizational level, let us be more diligent. Question motives. Challenge values. Keep political agendas far removed from the noble mission of the NIH.

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